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The Ohio State University

Commencement Address

Chancellor Herman B Wells

December 20, 1943 9:30 a.m. Columbus, Ohio

I am honored and pleased to participate in
for several reasons and one of these is
your commencement ceremony because this is a state
university. The American state university is a
unique institution in the world of higher education
fashioned by our society and widely admired elsewhere.
The American state university is the servant of all
of the people ~~of the commonwealth.~~ It has no
restricted allegiance to any creed, doctrine, political
party, or economic interest. Thus it is the symbol
of our confidence in the ability of all free men to
contribute to democratic growth.

~~I am pleased.~~

I am pleased to be a part of your ceremony because this University is an outstanding American university and hence of the university world everywhere. I was in London in September and was pleased to read ^a~~the~~ lead editorial of the London Sunday Times which lauded American university education, comparing it favorably to English higher education. The editorial specifically mentioned this University along with two others in the Midwest as having faculties and research facilities superior to those of any but three or four English universities, important recognition indeed, especially considering the source.

John Masfield, referring to English universities, once wrote, "They give to the young in their impressionable years the bond of a lofty purpose shared, of a great corporate life whose links will not be loosed until

~~they die." In one of~~

they die."

In one of Robert Frost's inimitable poems he
says:

"Don't join too many gangs
Join few if any
Join the United States
and join the family
And not much in between
unless a college."

Thus Frost and Masefield speak of the
permanent ties that bind a man to his Alma Mater.
Frost puts the college next to family and country, and
Masefield suggests a bond that only death will break.

Your Alma Mater is worthy of such loyalty.

~~I am proud~~

I am proud to be a part of your ceremony because this University is a member of the Big Ten group of universities, a group which has collective scholarly resources unmatched by any academic group of similar size in the world. As a onetime, active member of the Council of Ten, I have had the opportunity to know and work with your distinguished President. He is a highly respected member of the group whose ^{great ability, and} dedicated and selfless devotion is an inspiration to all who have had the privilege of his friendship.

Finally, I am honored to be here today because I have the opportunity to speak to the members of this class and hopefully to become a member of this class. I recognize that commencement speeches are devilish inventions of the faculty, designed to prove to the

~~class that the~~

class that the faculty authority remains supreme for yet a little while longer. But, since it is the Christmas season, I shall try to play Santa Claus and give you the gift of brevity.

To borrow from Ambassador Stevenson, I am supposed to talk to you for a while, you are supposed to listen a while, and I only hope we finish at the same time.

President Butler once told a graduating class at Columbia that every year in the world's history had been crucial and he had no doubt that Adam had said to Eve, "My dear, this is a crucial period in the world's history and everything depends on us."

It is the fashion for commencement speakers to talk of the sorry state of crisis in the world and to

~~challenge members of the~~

challenge members of the graduating class to put it right. I shall not follow this conventional pattern.

Instead, in my remarks I wish to examine in historical perspective how the responsibilities of educated men and women have evolved in our American society and the meaning of this for your generation.

I see at least two previous eras in our history. The first was the era of conquest. It lasted from discovery through colonial times, into the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period we pushed forward our geographical frontiers; we settled our land. The popular hero of that day was the man of physical courage and endurance--of muscle and of brawn, and of tough moral fiber.

~~This was a period~~

This was a period also of loneliness and individualism, of "each man for himself."

The principal responsibility of our most highly educated citizens during this first era was to provide the spiritual leadership of the frontier--to give spiritual strength to men and women as they fought the wilderness.

The second period of our history was the era of social amalgamation. It lasted into the first half of the twentieth century. This was the era of the "melting pot." English, Irish, Germans, Italians, Greeks, Poles, Russians, and people from many other countries combined their individual cultures, their talents, and their aspirations. They learned here in the New World how to "get along;" and gradually they fused or "melted" into a new united people, with a

~~national identity all~~

national identity all its own.

Thus the era of social amalgamation searched for social homogeneity and "typicalness" for solutions to the problems of group living and "group adjustment." This was a period not of loneliness and individualism, but of "togetherness," of belief in "strength in numbers," and of steadily growing pressures toward a degree of conformity.

The principal responsibility of our most highly educated people during that second era was to provide the social leadership of a maturing society. They also met the steadily rising requirements in professional skills and services of an increasingly complex America. But in that period American education was motivated primarily by a strong sense of group consciousness and social obligation.

~~This era of social-~~

This era of social amalgamation probably came
to an end in the 1950s. *I believe we* ~~the~~ now ~~may~~ have entered a
third period of our history. I should like to call
this the era of imagination. Yours is one of the
early classes to graduate into this new era.

You find our land now conquered and settled.
You enter into business, professional, educational,
or public affairs of an American society which has its
own unique identity. Compared to the years of the
second era, group life in America now is reasonably
adjusted. I make this assertion fully aware of the
summer of discontent we have witnessed in the field
of race relations and the tragic assassination of our
President. While some of our most serious problems
still are problems of group-living-in-harmony, most
of us are ~~equally~~ confident that with patience and

~~Good will these~~

good will these remaining problems will come ever closer to satisfactory solution.

The challenges of this new era, however, are as difficult as those which our society faced earlier; but the new opportunities also may far exceed even our boldest dreams: New and better materials, new products, new forms of energy, and even new space in new worlds now are within our grasp--your grasp. Also before you are new and better ways of doing things, a new prosperity, a new faith in excellence, new ways of life, and new ways of war and of peace.

All of these are opportunities to be developed by your minds and your imagination. The new era, therefore, may again be a period of loneliness and individualism. But the new loneliness which you will

~~face will not be~~

face will not be the geographical loneliness of the prairie; it will be intellectual loneliness--because the world of imaginativeness is a lonely world. The new individualism, your individualism, will be the individualism of intellectual independence, scientific skepticism, originality, and honest non-conformity.

The principal responsibility of our most educated persons--your responsibility--in this new era therefore will be to provide the intellectual leadership of a society which for survival and growth and the development of the new opportunities depends increasingly on intellectual resources and the creative imagination of her most highly trained men and women.

This intellectual leadership will need to be

~~exercised at different~~

exercised at different levels of creativeness. We shall require the highest intellectual excellence of which necessarily only the few most favored minds are capable; at the same time we also shall need ever higher educational competence for steadily larger numbers of people of more nearly average talents.

But whatever the level of creativeness at which you will take your place, in this era of imagination you will need to come to terms with the world of ideas. Speculation in ideas will flourish. Abstract thought will thrive. Criticism with careful judgment and unconventionality in thought and speech will be in good taste. There will be a new sensitivity to beauty and a new appreciation of the interpretive and creative arts. There will be new patterns of work and discipline. Research, which employs disciplined

imagination, is likely

imagination, is likely to expand at a faster rate than any other activity. There will be a great deal more thinking in this ever more thought- and idea-conscious era.

This then is your responsibility and your opportunity. As graduates of a distinguished University, society has the right to ask you to assume a major and uncommon share of these responsibilities, *of intellectual leadership*

One of my presidential predecessors at Indiana University was David Starr Jordan who migrated from Indiana to become the first president of Stanford. It has been said that Dr. Jordan belonged "to that noble company of men who reach the mountain tops of achievement. He had the spirit of the pioneer, a mind that was unafraid, though the guiding footprints of those who preceded him thinned out until they

~~left no trace.~~

left no trace. Where most men would halt and turn back, he pressed onward with renewed zeal and enthusiasm."

A manifestation of his daring is revealed by his climbing of the Matterhorn on one of his walking trips through Europe with a group of his students in natural science. The Matterhorn was the last of the great Alpine peaks to be conquered by expert mountain climbers.

In his autobiography, Dr. Jordan wrote of their approach to the great peak, "Ever before us as we mounted the green valley, above us as we toiled up the pass, above us everywhere--dark, majestic, inaccessible--rose the huge pyramid of the grandest of the Alps, its long hand clutching at the sky. The Matterhorn burns itself into the memory as nothing

~~else in all Europe does.~~

else in all Europe does. Three of its neighbors . . . are indeed a little higher, but no other peak in the world makes such good use of its height."

Later he admitted that it was "mad" for his small party of amateurs to attempt to climb it, and that personally he sympathized with an old Indiana farmer who came late to a lecture in which the exploit was recounted. The old gentleman took a front seat, listened with much interest, but at last could stand it no longer and in a loud whisper, audible throughout the auditorium, asked his neighbor, "what the devil were they up there for?"

The answer, of course, was to be found in the nature of the man himself. As his party rested in the Swiss village of Zermatt at the base of the Matterhorn, Dr. Jordan recounts that "that mountain hung over

~~our heads, and~~

our heads, and dared us to come."

The era of imagination provides you with new
and higher peaks of opportunity.

I pray that when the mountain dares you to
come, you will be ready and eager to respond.

I wish for you good climbing and Godspeed.
